

The Joy of Preschool Reading



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Preschool children can learn to read in a way that is developmentally and culturally appropriate if they are presented with the necessary supports. The *IDRA Newsletter* has previously described “centers of excellence” and the eight components that must be addressed for students to reach reading readiness success at the preschool level (Scott, 2003).

There is a research base that supports centers of excellence ([See box](#)). José Rodríguez, of IDRA, has noted that, “when students’ prior knowledge is activated and their curiosity is stimulated, they begin to make positive associations to reading” (2003).

How do we activate students’ prior knowledge and raise their curiosity? It is even more important than ever that preschool teachers build exciting, excellent classrooms that promote literacy. What do these classrooms look like?

Engaging Environment

Excellent classrooms are dynamic. They breathe life and excitement into preschool children about the joy of reading. At their center, students are acquiring basic skills and competencies in oral language development, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness (Schickedanz, 1999).

When entering a center of excellence, one sees a vibrant, active, engaging, interactive learning space where children are being supported to achieve reading competency with a teacher who guides and facilitates the process.

The environment is rich with a spirit of acceptance and valuing of diversity and cultural difference. It also resonates with the richness of language and print. Teachers encourage communication and language exploration through discussions in children’s first language and in English as a basis for learning English. Provocative questions on materials, books, pictures, computer-based materials, and other forms of print are used as a basis for learning.

Provocative Activities

Through the activities they undertake, children are encouraged to talk to each other, speculate about the outcomes and inquiry, predict what might happen, and check their speculations against the actual outcomes of their reading.

In the library, they explore predictable and non-predictable books to increase their capacity to extract word meaning from the way words are displayed in relation to pictures in books. They examine book characteristics to determine meaning. They practice pronouncing and sounding out letters to create words. And when they do, they stretch their understanding because they learn that words mean something in the real world (Schickedanz, 1999).

Through play and through direct and explicit instruction from the teacher, children get help in learning word meaning as their teacher reads stories to them. Story reading in context provides a powerful tool for the teacher to observe learners sounding out letters and words, defining new and unfamiliar words, and examining what children already know and bring to the reading

experience and what they are acquiring.

Both with the teacher's help and independent of the teacher, they practice rhyming and pronouncing sounds that they can compare with others to improve their oral language abilities. They connect letters to form new sounds and blends of sounds as they are read to and, in doing so, learn to figure out the pronunciation of words for which they also work out meaning.

Teachers guide these emerging readers in constructing meaning through story maps of familiar and new stories where the structure of stories are plotted and organized by the teacher with the children's help to determine characters, the setting, the problem or situations that must be handled, and the outcomes of the characters' actions. Together, they examine cause and effect, respond to problem and solution questions, conduct comparisons, and describe situations to gain meaning and understanding.

The teacher reads books to them, and they can become involved by chiming in, filling in the blank words, and practicing rhythm, pacing, and pronunciation (Schickedanz, 1999). These activities develop and extend phonemic awareness. Practicing reading and writing the alphabet, seeing the alphabet form words as letters name and label objects, places, spaces, activities, and people in the environment help to strengthen alphabet knowledge and strengthen each child's ability to read.

Print Rich Centers

The environment supports reading in many ways. Naturally, items are labeled and named. But the environment also is print rich, in a way that research reports is necessary to ensure literacy, oral language development, and improved reading ability (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; Goodman, 1986; Owocki, 2001; Armington, 1997; Schickedanz, 1999).

There are pictures and written materials available everywhere. The dramatic play areas have props where children can act out what they read and hear. They create their own stories with characters and plots and with problems and solutions they work out.

There are writing areas in the room where children can create their own stories or dictate stories to their teachers. There are read-aloud opportunities and "word walls" that foster real opportunities for phonological awareness, alphabet awareness, and oral language development.

There are materials available for children to publish their writing, including computers where children can actually practice their letters and spelling whole words. There are floor stories that children can engage in, with pocket and folder stories that they can manipulate.

Students are encouraged to create their own stories, letters, and other printed communications as they carry out activities that reflect the day-to-day experiences of life in the dramatic play center, literacy center, library, quiet area, desktop publishing area, large group and circle time area, manipulative area, block area, and other centers that periodically open and close based upon the lessons being implemented (Armington, 1997; Owocki, 2001; Snow and Tabors, 1996; Baker et al, 1995; Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000).

For students whose first language is other than English, the native language serves as the foundation for English language acquisition. Cognitive skills transfer from one language to another, and students who are literate in their first language will apply these skills and other academic proficiencies to the second language (National Reading Panel, 2000).

It is possible to create a world of reading excitement and joy in a center of reading excellence where children are learning to read excellently. Unlocking access to the curriculum in the upper grades begins with reading development at the preschool level.

Resources

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Staffing

Center of excellence directors and at least one teacher possess a bachelor's degree. This teacher serves as lead teacher. At least 80 percent of the teachers have an associate of arts degree (Shen and Poppink, 2003; Yelland, 2000).

Educational Equity

All classrooms in a center of excellence have the appropriate resources to support opportunities to learn regardless of the economic circumstance, English language learning level, disability, race, and gender (Scott, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002; *No Child Left Behind Act*, 2002). Diverse cultures represented in the classroom are respected and addressed in the instruction.

Accountability

Education stakeholders, including parents, at centers of excellence hold themselves and each other responsible for the creation of classrooms of excellence that support the literacy development of children. Each stakeholder helps to build an appropriate educational environment and experience (Scott, 2002; *No Child Left Behind Act*, 2002; Scranton and Doubet, 2003).

Teacher Expectations

Teachers in centers of excellence articulate high expectations for all young children and are expected to discuss high school and college completion at this very early age (Teale, 1978; Snow et al., 1998; Helm and Lang, 2003).

- The expectation is that children will be ready to read in kindergarten.
- The expectation is clearly and continually communicated to young children.
- The actions of teachers and other adults reflect the expectation.
- The reading success expectation is reflected in the curriculum and classroom activities.
- Children's reading efforts and successes are celebrated by adult stakeholders.
- Children are supported to celebrate and joyfully hold high expectations for their own genuine effort and success.

Academic Achievement

Centers of excellence have measurable objectives consistent with state curriculum standards with special emphasis on the necessary prerequisite skills in literacy (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension) and other academic areas to be successful (National Reading Panel, 2000; CIRCLE, 2002; Wilson, 2003; Snow et al., 1996; Holiday and Parker, 1998; Puebles and Lowe, 1998; Irving, 2000).

- Kindergarten reading readiness and appropriate numeracy preparation are successfully demonstrated on classroom assessments and measurements.
- Student effort and high student outcomes reflect a belief in the possible appropriately transformed into the reality of demonstrated high performance.
- Children successfully achieve at the highest level of excellence in reading and numeracy readiness.

Social Maturity

Young children have been trained and received guidance in self discipline to manage their learning individually and in groups in a way that creates personal and shared academic success and prepares them to move to higher levels of achievement (Schickendanz, 1999; Helms and Lang, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Whitten and Rodriguez-Campos; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines).

- Children learn to manage their own lives in school and beyond.
- Children learn to cooperate and work with others.
- Children learn to practice resilience and perseverance.
- Children learn academic goal setting and goal reaching.
- Children joyfully embrace learning and literacy as a key to their own success.

Classroom Management

Centers of excellence adhere to organizational systems and structures in the classroom and the human, mechanical, and technical supports for learning. All of the interactive dimensions of the classroom's operation are aligned and integrated in a manner to support student achievement and excellence and the appropriate acquisition of skills and competencies for academic success (CIRCLE, 2002; Yelland, 2000; Dodge and Colker, 1998; Rand, 2000).

- Classroom curriculum and learning experiences are organized and structured for success.
- Human, mechanical, and technical supports for learning and literacy are aligned, articulated, and integrated to support reading readiness success.
- Curriculum is organized to engage the learner in oral language development, phonological, alphabet, and print awareness.
- The learning environment is print rich and provides meaningful, challenging, creative and joyful reading readiness opportunities in every learning/interest space.

Parent Participation

Parents work collaboratively with teachers and other staff in schools and/or in homes in support of schools to create and build opportunities for academic excellence and success for their children (Epstein, 1996; Dodge and Colker, 1998; Bower, 2000; Fischer and Murray, 1998; Helms and Katz, 2001).

- Parents reinforce learning at home.
- Parents actively engage in building their own English language competency and proficiency.
- Teachers and parents collaborate on building children's reading readiness and school success.
- Parents are engaged to participate in classroom planning.
- Parents are presented with opportunities to participate in the learning experiences in classrooms.
- Parents, with teacher assistance, review student performance outcome data and plan for continued learning achievement and success.

These centers of excellence by their very nature become training centers.

Source: Intercultural Development Research Association, 2003

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